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SHORTCOMINGS OF THE SEXUAL METAPHOR IN NEW YORK'S INDEPENDENT FILMS

by Ronald Tavel

Ronald Tavel was born in Brooklyn. He was Playwright-in-Residence for the Playhouse of the Ridiculous in New York, where his works included Shower, The Life of Juanita Castro, The Life of Lady Godiva, Screen Test, *and* Kitchenette. *He has written and directed numerous films for Andy Warhol Films Incorporated, among them* Screen Test, Vinyl, Suicide, Space, Hedy, Withering Sights, Hanoi Hannah, *and parts of* The Chelsea Girls. *He is the author of the Off-Broadway play* Gorilla Queen.

> Little flower—but *if* I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.
> —Tennyson

If you hold that eternity is in a second and infinity in a grain of sand, it follows that any arbitrary moment or haphazardly chosen object, properly handled, contains within it the possibility of unveiling the face of final truth. Up from Aristophanes and down to Mae West (probably America's best playwright), the sexual metaphor has proved a singularly rewarding approach to a vision of man and his relation to the firmament. A child develops within the bonds of his dependency on others and is later compulsively motivated by his sex drives to reclaim the lost union of his childhood. For the artist, understanding of this urge toward re-union with the race of mankind may illuminate an individual's re-union with conceptual reality. Among "underground" filmmakers the sexual metaphor is used with great frequency, yet the movies they produce all convey

a sense of incompletion. Perhaps the reason for this is that none of these young Americans can satisfactorily be termed either classical or romantic. All slip into a third category, variously defined as fragmentary, decadent, mannerist, or fractional, and so, unhappily, their works join the bulk of our nation's creative output and seriously fall short of the ultimate standards raised in continental Europe as far back as Homer. If we ask why these movies are incomplete, we invariably are led to the conclusion that their makers are as fractured as the visions they produce.

Clearly, the general creative temperament of our age is romantic. With certain notable exceptions (classicists like Jasper Johns and William Burroughs), nearly everything about our contemporary avant-garde interests bespeaks romanticism. One may note especially the attention paid to mysticism,[1] transcendentalism, psychedelics, astrology, minority sexualism, obscurity of form, mixed media, iconoclasm, and expansion of acceptable subject material. The fractionalism of the moviemen in question, then, would seem to be a result of degeneration from the romantic mode. How and why did it take place?

One of the earliest exponents of underground cinema was the singularly aptly-named Kenneth Anger. Mr. Anger's major metaphors are sex and astrology. His first important film, *Fireworks*, remains his most successful. In this opus he presents with disarming honesty and innocence the sexual fantasies of a youth decidedly past the security that can be gained from a delicately balanced love-union and now well on his way to responding only to a parental protector so ominous in his ability to defend that he is virtually a sadist in the most dramatic sense of the word. Anger's nonfluid and unimaginatively focused commercial venture, *Scorpio Rising*, conveys a distrust of human beings so overwhelming that the life of the entire

[1] Mysticism in Western art (Oriental art is another matter) is almost entirely romantic. Shakespeare's mystical mythology in *The Tempest* would be enough in itself to qualify him as a romantic did not the unmitigated passion that is the totality of *Lear* definitively place him in that category. Sidney, Blake, Coleridge, Whitman, Ginsberg, Cézanne, Giacometti, etc., are all unreservedly romantic. W.B. Yeats, a genuine classicist who spent all his life studying mysticism, left a body of work from which his occult concerns may easily be dismissed despite the fact that few scholars have had the courage to note as much.

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race is defined as little more than a sadomasochistic orgy—and not the most authentic of orgies, at that. (Anyone harboring reservations about Anger's suspicions of mankind is urged to read his book, *Hollywood Babylon*, which is extraordinarily paranoid in its interpretation.) Astrology, the second ingredient in *Scorpio Rising*, enables Anger to celebrate his birth and the position of his major stars in what is traditionally the most evil of all the signs of the zodiac—that is, supposedly, the most paranoid, the most jealous, and the most sexual in that it governs the genitals themselves. To make art depend on astrology in itself implies failure, since the determinations of astrology preclude the numberless possibilities which lie open to us, pre-establish a fixed vision, and deter the artist from an organic substantiation.

Gregory Markopoulos, too, appears to use sexuality as a metaphor. Many of this filmmaker's early works, like *Du Sang de la Volupté et de la Mort*, remind one of Cocteau. Greek myths have certain drawbacks as movie subjects since they are wholly verbal, and literature has not as yet mixed well with visual revelation. For example, Antonioni proved rather disappointing in *Red Desert* when, after an observationally accurate and painstaking buildup, he relegated his pronouncement (*"Tutto cantî"*) to the narration in the little allegorical beach-and-sea scene: for nothing in the bathing girl, the rocks, the beach, or the waves innately invests the consciousness with such a conclusion. At the showdown, he cannot make the eyes convince. Markopoulos shares this shortcoming. The viewer must bring to his films a wealth of extracurricular knowledge and is then obliged to play games with Markopoulos's use or abuse of such information. The obscurity is excessive, self-indulgent, and extreme; but it fails to intimidate since it usually merely distracts the viewer from what he is seeing by substituting concern for what the filmmaker is referring to. Sexuality appears to be the subject of the myths, but it continually eludes us inasmuch as the sneaky peeks at nudes are as much of the sexual union as we are going to get. I'd feel much healthier if that expert editing were to pause for five full seconds and let me look at that most natural of attractions, the unadorned human. (As a footnote, I must add that Markopoulos's newest film, a compilation of three-minute portraits, is his purest visual achievement and a tour de force in providing unending interest in something that could easily have proved unmitigated tedium.)

Jack Smith takes Aristotle to task by propounding the theory that pornography can be art. If by pornography is meant anything that moves the audience to action, the present writer would have to reassert Aristotle's rejection of it, since to pornograph a viewer is to make him aware of himself as separation and his physicalness as incompletion, and to move him to action is to demote him from the level of free contemplation. The problem is, however, more complex than it might seem, and I believe Smith may have made, or at least inaugurated, an important contribution to cinema. For if you can accept sexual *desire* as the initial involving factor, that which sucks the audience into the forthcoming experience and, once that audience is firmly enmeshed, proceeds to raise it to inactive and ever-broadening speculation, then it may be possible to consider turning pornography into art or, to be precise, letting pornography lead the spectator into art. But having allowed this much to Smith, we are then confronted with where his work takes us: for far from rounding out into reunion with the human race, it leads us into a highly forsaken and pitiful isolation where sexual ecstasy is re-enacted at the earliest stages of childhood fixation, where fantasies protect us from an inordinately hard-to-attain reality, and where identification with a sensationally psychotic mother is the only means to channel the crucified libido. It is quite possible that *Flaming Creatures* (one of the best examples of cinematography on record) does not bring us nearer to sexual comprehension through its point-blank confrontations with genitals, but rather encourages us to the celibate annihilation of which it is so innocent an exposé, allowing us to breathe easy and rest deceptively securely on the first and most frustrating rung of concupiscent defeat. Smith's subject matter is Hollywood, his method sexual hyperbole, and his product a confection that might well be labeled "The Epic of Infancy"; he is as exacting in detail as any mannerist, and we have from him the most obviously fragmented concept of life to be offered by an important contemporary creator.

Andy Warhol Films Inc. (a company name covering a multitude of sins and virtually an army of cooperative artists) is dominated by its eponymous founder, most significantly

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Mike Sullivan: From *Tarzan Finds a Mate,* 1965

when the films defend an unmoving camera. Here one is given a very persistent and precise point of view: all objects and changes in the universe relate to the central and unblinking, absolutely fixed eye. It is the most boring and least entertaining position of vision, but it is the most exact that ever challenged a movie audience. It is the telescope of the voyeur, the sexual participation that never surmounts the starting stage, and, on further consideration, it comes dangerously close to necrophilia: for the motionless camera eye does not seem to achieve its end until the beholden object also ceases to move. Sometimes the object fails to budge for six hours. Herein all sexual activity is defined as too problematic, and nothing short of death can reduce interpersonal difficulties to a level at which they can be coped with. When the camera pans (and Warhol himself is usually behind the abruptions) one has the opportunity to study the personality of this eye, and more often than not the foregoing assertion is confirmed: for the camera wanders indiscriminately over the situation, sensation, and character of what is performed before it, resting for a moment on some specific or other, but wholly ignorant or repressive of the events taking place. As Warhol's scenarist, I struggled to reassert the human jurisdiction in the graphic, until our dichotomy of intention finally tore the films in two. For when one is positive about saying nothing one can still say nothing with fascinating conviction.

Turning to a still younger generation of filmmakers, we discover that the works of William Vehr are often confessedly little more than the statement of their own fractionalism. Each begins electrifyingly, forcefully, with a grandiose and exotic sexual phantasm, builds up with delicious visual taste, to a towering center, and then brusquely ends. It is as if Mr. Vehr, all decked out in his sex delirium, has nowhere to go.

In the films of Michael Sullivan, sexual connection is so arduous to cement that when it is finally within grasp it immediately degenerates into that finality of self-imprisoned despair called cannibalism. At the end of the film *Tarzan Finds a Mate* he does so only to devour her.

In summation, if we accept these underground practitioners of cinema as capable commentators on our culture, we must conclude that America is as sexually distressed and conceptually schismatic a society as any in the history of civilization.

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